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DISCUSSION NOTE
on
A UNIVERSITY OF THE NORTH?

On the subjects of higher education and research, there is wide consensus of opinion among those concerned with the Canadian North. Almost everyone agrees that higher education and research are good things; that it is important to strive for northern relevance, particularly in relation to renewable resource management and social science related to the North; that Northerners should have a lot to say about what is developed; and that Northerners should be fully involved in whatever is undertaken. So much is common ground.

The Goal: To Make the Eventual Happen Sooner

There is also strong agreement that "eventually" the spectrum of institutions concerned with higher education and research in the North would provide opportunities that are equivalent to those in the South. (The secondary school system would offer both academic and technical curricula.) Other institutions would further enrich and add to the variety of job oriented and para-professional programs, and at the same time perhaps offer academic studies that can be given transfer credit to universities.

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Additionally, by some set of devices, the academically oriented Northerner would have a more or less assured prospect for university training, preferably being exposed to material that has northern orientation wherever it is consistent with the nature of the academic discipline. Graduate programs would emphasize research in northern settings and would help build an indigenous research community. Finally, the picture would include a happy and productive collaboration of these northern activities with those in the rest of Canada.

The difference of opinion that exists is, of course, centred on how to achieve the eventuality and how to pace development to greatest advantage. Experience would suggest an incremental approach, building on existing and emerging structures, and timing new ventures to ensure their effectiveness to northern residents. But is experience the best guide in the circumstances in the North today? Should the North be "brought along" a familiar route that follows demand? To these questions the Science Council answer was "No". Instead, the Council proposed a University of the North, a vision which they hoped would provide a symbol of an aspiration to achieve the eventual sooner. Exploiting the physical facilities now in place and linking them with innovative modern communications technology, the Council has suggested how it might all happen in an imaginative way.

The evolution of the Science Council concept of a University of the North began, as have similar proposals made by others, with recognition of a need to provide a focus for the development of northern research activities explicitly designed to solve northern problems. It was perceived that an emphasis must be given now to encouraging research and its application through demonstration projects and extension activities. In years gone by, in other parts of Canada, this role was performed by structures such as agricultural schools that coupled applied research and extension activities with great success.

The circumstances in the North are more diverse, economically and culturally, than the agricultural South, requiring even greater diversity and flexibility from educators and their tools than was needed for agriculture. The technological and cultural impediments to effective communication are perhaps the most obvious. The success of such a venture depends, therefore, on the successful forging of links, links between existing northern institutions such as schools, libraries and radio stations, links between northern people and communities whose shared experiences will be of mutual benefit. Technology and knowledge transfer is a human process, but it is also a process which, especially in the North, can be enhanced and hastened by the unstinting application and development of appropriate computer and communications technologies.

The Science Council concept is accordingly for a university that would be technologically hypermodern, serving its students systematically and efficiently. The university would of necessity involve the establishment of a centre of resource inventories, and the continuing assembly of packages of information for a wide variety of users. To be sure, this kind of job doesn't need a university, but a university whose central physical presence is an information centre is an attractive idea, especially when the delivery system is seen to be largely based on telecommunications. It could make things happen.

What should it do and how would it work?

One of the major perceptions of northerners is that they need knowledge in the areas of renewable resource management - how to harvest trees, fish, fur and game so as to sustain an economic yield. This is by no means a simple problem for, while it is fairly easy to cut trees or to catch fish, it may be difficult to do it to economic advantage when markets are far distant. There are needs for new technologies of northern transportation, and for development of simple ways of increasing the value of northern products before they are sent "out". The core of the program for the University of the North should be an emphasis on technologies associated with development of the renewable resources of the North.

On the research side, it is always possible to restate the erstwhile hope that young Canadian academics will be sent north by their supervising professors, and that public service researchers with adjoint status will supervise research projects in the North. Certainly such things are possible, but contemporary practices of the granting agencies and the sophisticated goals of modern academics are not altogether encouraging. To make it occur, and to give it all continuity, the research supervisors should be perennially involved in a northern research network with its own graduate degree granting functions. The quality of the degrees would have to be safeguarded by routines of external review and examination and this is what a university is largely all about.

In the best tradition of the meaning of the word university, the University of North should be an autonomous institution. It should have a functional equivalent of a Senate, widely representative of various constituencies of interest. This body would have final authority over which courses and degrees would be available.

over model?

There are many other details to be worked out, of course, but they are not overwhelming; the appointment of a Board of Governors to provide fiscal accountability, a small administrative staff, a faculty of perhaps 50 members, and an equal sized group for the information and communications functions, and a university would be in place.

Already a number of initiatives in several parts of Canada, from Goose Bay to Whitehorse, hold promise for becoming important affiliates of a University of the North.

Summing it Up

Taken apart, the idea of a University of the North is perhaps best described as a collection of pieces each of which has wide approval and each of which could be tackled separately. When the pieces are put together and given a covering label, there is a new optimism that it might all happen. The Science Council Committee considered the idea of using the word "Institute", which has so many kinds of connotations that one more wouldn't hurt. Some thought was given to recommending the establishment of a "Centre" or describing the package as a "Network". And so on. Nothing quite captured the element of aspiration as well as the word "University". What is important is that it should all come to pass, and if the proposal for a University of the North is adequately pursued, there could emerge a design for higher education in the North that could be a source of national, and especially northern, satisfaction.

Some Political Realities

The political boundaries which divide the North have little relation to northern facts of life, and they accordingly constitute an impediment to doing what is sensible. Provincial governments each guard their constitutional prerogatives in the field of education, so each is saddled with a need to consider how best to serve its northern

citizens. The two territories are served by the federal government, but each is anxious to have an educational system suited to its' own needs. Is a University of the North to serve all northern Canadians? Just those in the territories? Just those in the Northwest Territories? Only some of those in the Northwest Territories? All in the same (which?) languages of instruction?

Many visions are now competing for some part of the educational role in the North. Many provincial governments are pondering how best to deliver higher education to their rural, uniquely northern regions. Many southern Canadian universities have northward oriented programs which can logically be extended to a more active and continuing presence in the North. Some newer universities also have very strong aspirations for northern service, Athabaska University being a conspicuous example. North of 60°, the University of Canada North has already been chartered, and while the institution is nearly dormant, its vision is not. The Yukon Territory is well under way on a community and regional college activity. There are several native cultural colleges in early stages of development. In short, there is every prospect that by an aggregation of many small initiatives, the intent of a University of the North could be satisfied. There is perhaps an equal prospect that by embarking on so many small ventures the intent could be frustrated. How best to ensure the local relevance,

the quality, and the economic efficiency of higher education in the North?

It's time for a national meeting among those responsible for higher education in the North - the participants being the provincial governments, the Territorial Assemblies and the federal government. It is also time for some public debate among non-governmental representatives from the various northern groups that are currently engaged in discussion of higher education, and from some of the southern universities with northern aspirations. Certainly, it is time for frank discussion of the political and economic realities, and for some decisions about what should happen next, and why.

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